
Vivian V. Simpson

1903–1969, PRINCES GEORGE'S COUNTY

Maryland's first woman secretary of state.

In 1949, Governor William Preston Lane, Jr. appointed Vivian Simpson Maryland's secretary of state. With this appointment, the first for a woman, Simpson finally broke gender barriers for women who would follow in government cabinet positions at the state and national levels.

Maryland's state government adheres closely to the United States model of government. The three branches of power consist of the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judicial branch. The governor is the chief executive of the state and presides over the Governor's Executive Council, known as the cabinet. The Constitutional Amendment in 1830 created the office of secretary of state as a governor-appointed position that required the advice and consent of the state senate. While the duties of that office have varied over the years, Vivian Simpson came into the office in the post-World War II era, a time of great change and challenge in Maryland.

Simpson was born before women could vote, hold elected office, or even attend many universities. But many of those barriers fell during her youth, and by the early 1920s, she was a student at the University of Maryland. As a student, Simpson tackled those obstacles still standing, determined to afford women opportunities hitherto reserved exclusively for men. A modern feminist, Simpson fought university officials over alleged infractions, which included ignoring lights out and disturbing the quiet hour. Simpson countered by seeking a writ of mandamus, stating she wanted only those privileges given to male students. The university fought back by charging Simpson with maintaining an independent attitude toward university officials and causing dissension among women students (Scheeler 349). When she tried to establish a chapter of a national women's fraternity on campus, the administration again found her in violation of university rule. Simpson was expelled, and even appeals to Maryland's highest court, the Court of Appeals, did not reverse the decision.

In 1937, Simpson completed her undergraduate work with academic honors at George Washington University, where she also received her law degree. Following admittance to the Maryland Bar, she established a general law practice in Maryland with her brother. However, her urge to fight for women's rights never faltered. In 1930, Simpson and other women's rights advocates visited President Herbert Hoover and urged him to support United States opposition to any convention of the World Conference of the Codification of International Laws not based on equality between men and women (Scheeler 349).

By 1940, the governor appointed Simpson, the first woman to hold the post, to the State Industrial Accident Commission, which oversaw cases of on-the-job accidents. She simultaneously served as vice-chair of the Commission to Study Workman's Compensation Laws of Maryland. Throughout the state, she presided over cases, mostly industrial, where workers sought compensation for job-related injuries. Both attorneys and litigants alike respected her civility and found her impartial, patient, scholarly, and fair (Scheeler 350). That respect eventually earned Simpson the office of president of the Montgomery County Bar Association (there she established a law library in the local courthouse), and a vice presidency in the Maryland Bar Association, where she was a member of the Judicial Appointments Committee. Governor Lane's choice of Simpson, a well-qualified public servant with a distinguished record, as secretary of state was hailed as another milestone for women.

Simpson believed that "people that were equally endowed were on an equal basis" and felt that she had "had that kind of treatment from not only members of the bar but from the bench as well" (Scheeler 351). Vivian Simpson maintained her legal practice throughout her public-service career. Her work in both the private and public sectors serves as a model to those women who did, and will, follow in her footsteps. ✱

In Stegman, Carolyn B. "Women of Achievement in Maryland History."